HEADLINE: Amidst an increase in Coronavirus cases, informal economy thrives through corruption.

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QUOTE: “That’s how we get to do business, if you don’t pay you get arrested and your staff is confiscated. As for the pandemic, l know it’s there but l still need to survive,” says Progress Gwenzi.

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NARRATIVE LEAD

Harare, Zimbabwe_ Forex traders, vegetable vendors and other informal traders go about their business at a busy shopping centre in a Harare high density suburb. Some are wearing masks, but others aren’t. (CQ_Reporter)

Buyers occasionally stop by to purchase, colourful notes in form of bond notes, the legal tender here are exchanged, no sanitisers are used in the process. It’s business as usual. (CQ_Reporter)

Progress Gwenzi (39) (CQ_Source sheet) is one of the informal traders. He roasts maize for resale at his smoky stall as a way of surviving. Despite the lockdown, Gwenzi, (CQ) tall and dark in complexion has been selling his maize.

Like many informal traders, Gwenzi (CQ) isn’t allowed to operate under the country’s total lockdown. He occasionally runs away from the police but most of the times he pays a US$1 to US$3 to be allowed to operate. (CQ_Gwenzi)

“That’s how we get to do business, if you don’t pay you get arrested and your staff is confiscated. As for the pandemic, l know it’s there but l still need to survive,” he says. (CQ_Gwenzi)

NEWS VALUE

As a measure to curtail the spread of Coronavirus, the government of Zimbabwe introduced a second lockdown, but corruption weakens the enforcement of the regulations as informal traders continue to operate and say their actions are justified amidst an escalation of the pandemic. (CQ_Reporter+Sources)

CONTEXT, BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND STATISTICS

According to daily SMS data provided by the department of civil protection, as of 27 January 2021 Zimbabwe had a cumulative figure of 32 304 Coronavirus cases, 23 687 recoveries and 1122 deaths which have been increasing on a daily basis. Harare and Bulawayo remains the epicentre of the virus.

A survey conducted by Afrobarometer is a pan-African research institution states that the lockdown is a necessary initiative , “it represents a financial crisis for the three quarters (76%) of the economically active population who earn their living in the informal sector” (CQ_LINK).

A research conducted under a programme called Knowledge for Development funded by the UK Aid states that many people in Zimbabwe rely on the informal sector to sustain families. CQ_LINK

“Reliable information on the informal economy is scarce, but a large number of Zimbabweans make a living in this sector, estimated at 94.5% in 2014…The informal economy in Zimbabwe contributed on average 61% towards the country’s GDP over 1991 to 2015, making it one of the largest informal economies in the world.” CQ_LINK

Local Voices

Tendai Howera (CQ_Source sheet) who owns a small grocery shop in Southlea Park (CQ) says he is running his business despite the lockdown.

"Every day the police come here and l pay $5 for them to turn a blind eye and l continue with my business. l cannot starve to death because of the pandemic, my business has to continue," he says. (CQ_Howera)

Howera’s business is common in this neighbourhood. Open spaces that are left out by the city council are used to build small shops popularly known as tuckshops. Built using farm brick- clay bricks that are reinforced by fire and normally used in rural areas, these structures are temporary and yet rampant. (CQ_Reporter)

Like Howera, Steven Gurupira (CQ_Source sheet) also runs a small shop. He only opens only one of the two doors to his shop. (CQ_Reporter)

“It’s a strategy that l use in case the police come, it will be quicker for me to close only one door,” he says. (CQ_Gurupira)

But sometimes he is unlucky.

“At times l get caught and l have to pay bribes to continue operating…l know the virus has killed thousands of people in Zimbabwe but closing my shop won’t do me any good,” he says. (CQ_Gurupira)

Advocates

Samuel Wadzai the Director of Vendors Initiative for Socio Economic Transformation (VISET) a local non-governmental organisation that advocates for the rights of vendors (CQ_Source sheet) says informal traders are facing a number of challenges under the lockdown.

“Our expectation was that informal traders were going to be categorised under essential services and really this was going to assist some of our members to continue operating during lockdown. With the borders closed and virtually all the markets not permitted to open it means there are no ways of surviving,” he says. (CQ_Wadzai)

He says they expected part of the informal sector especially those that provide basic commodities to be allowed to operate with a provision of the necessary Personal Protective Equipment.

“The government indicated that it will be supporting the informal economy by way of offering grants, we are still waiting for this, nothing has materialised, the people are suffering and there is a lot of hunger out there, says Wadzai. (CQ_Wadzai)

Wadzai says people have resorted to engage in corruption in order to survive. (CQ_Wadzai)

“We have observed this because people have been blocked from operating…by restricting the sector, the authorities are creating fertile grounds for corruption, we don’t condone this and we call upon the government to allow part of the informal sector to operate and support them so that we do away with these corrupt activities that we are witnessing,” he says. (CQ_Wadzai)

Official

Emma Ncube the chairperson of the parliamentary portfolio committee on labour and social welfare (CQ_Source sheet) says that the government hasn't been able to provide loans and cushioning funds for informal traders.

"So far we are only providing support for the vulnerable people…the ministry has no concrete standpoint with regards to support to informal traders," she says. (CQ_Ncube)

Ncube adds that they are aware informal traders are defying lockdown regulations, "because they don't have anything to survive on but this has a consequence on the Coronavirus cases which are increasing," She added. (CQ_Ncube)

LANGUAGE: Linda Mujuru translated some interviews from Shona to English.